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for through the study of great prose works the young student may be led to feel something of the joy of trying to achieve what the great masters have actually accomplished,—not merely intelligible, but adequate and artistic, self-expression. Let teachers not be mis-

lead by the idea that they should not try to make authors of pupils. The purpose of the teaching of composition is to develop the power of self-expression, and that is just another and more personal name for authorship.

## SPECIAL PROBLEMS IN HIGH SCHOOL COMPOSITION

By ELEANOR STRATTON  
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THERE ARE so many special problems in the teaching of written composition that I shall select only three of these problems as the subject of my talk today. These three problems are *special* in one sense; yet they are general in another, as they are the problems that confront every high school teacher of written composition, no matter what form the composition may take. They are: first, the problem of making theme writing seem worthwhile to the pupil; second, the problem of teaching the higher forms of composition without an adequate foundation to build upon; and third, the problem of finding sufficient time to correct enough written work to do justice by the students.

The problem which is of most vital importance to the English teacher and which confronts her from the beginning of the freshman year until the very last theme of the senior year is handed in, is the problem of so arousing and stimulating the interest of the pupil in each theme assignment that each particular theme becomes a worthwhile project to the student instead of a mere perfunctory exercise that must be done to secure a passing grade. This making a theme a worthwhile project instead of a dread task is no easy matter as every teacher of English can testify. But despite the difficulty of the task it must be done. And in order to do it the teacher must, in some way, manage to keep, year in and year out, her own interest and enthusiasm undiminished in the work. She must make herself feel, if she cannot do so otherwise, that each new theme is an adventure upon which she and that particular class are embarked. I confess right here, much to my sorrow, that this is no easy matter after the first few hundred themes have been corrected. But despite the difficulty the teacher must keep her interest and enthusiasm undiminished, for it is the match which is to kindle the fire of enthusiasm in the pupil.

But we also know that one match, no matter how brightly it may burn, will not start a good, quick fire, unless there is a plentiful supply of dry kindling also.

Now, the kindling which will start the fires of enthusiasm going in the pupil is the right kind of motivation. I am sorry to say the motivation kindling for written theme work is not as easy to find as it is for oral composition. The reason for this lies, I think, in the difficulty of securing enough publicity for written work. To stand well with our fellows is a great incentive to effort. A private failure may not affect us at all, but to fail in the presence of others is altogether a different matter. And as with us, so with children. This accounts for the ease with which an interest can be aroused in oral composition. In the latter it is easy to arrange for an audience, to make a special event of the exercise, and to work up such an interest in the affair that the student will throw himself heart and soul into this type of composition work. But to do this in written composition is not always easy, and until we do find ways of giving publicity to written work, and of making each exercise lead to some definite, concrete end, the work will not seem worthwhile enough to the average pupil to cause him to put forth his best effort; it will continue to be, in many cases, a mere perfunctory putting of words on paper, not real composition work.

The first step toward achieving our purpose of making theme writing worthwhile in the pupil's eyes is to disabuse his mind of the idea that his written work is a thing which concerns only himself, the teacher, and the waste basket. This triangle will do as much harm to the pupil's theme writing as the "eternal triangle" does to the home. The white light of publicity must beat upon all written work, if the pupil's best effort is to be called forth. An impossibility you say. Not altogether, if you remember that all things are relative, publicity as well as other things, and that the child's public is composed chiefly of the school and the home.

If we want the pupil to put enthusiasm into composition and so do his best work, we must try to make all the written work lead to something definite and concrete, something that the pupil can feel a pride in

and keep. We must not let him feel that he is just writing themes that lead nowhere except to more themes and a grade in the teacher's register, but we must make him feel that he is working to a definite object such as the writing of a worthwhile story, drama, poem, magazine article or essay, or toward the making of a letterguide, newspaper, or magazine, and that the preliminary work of writing and rewriting is just as necessary as the tryouts and preliminary practice of a football team before the game.

To arouse interest in the content side, we must have the written composition work something more than a certain number of weekly or monthly themes. The daily or weekly themes must have a definite goal; they must lead somewhere, so that the pupil will feel that what he is doing has a definite place in the scheme of things. For instance, suppose that the pupil is studying description and narration. Let him understand at the beginning that this practice work in description, in writing the beginning and the ending of stories, in plot-construction, etc., is practice work toward a definite goal, which is the writing of a worthwhile piece of literature—a short story, and that it has its place in achieving that end just as much as the practice work of the football team is necessary if the team is to win a game. Let him understand that this story is to be neatly bound in attractive cover paper, exhibited, read aloud to one or more classes, perhaps published in the school magazine, and finally taken home to be proudly displayed to the family circle and the family connections. The pupil has now some other incentive besides making a pass mark to cause him to put forth effort in the practice work as well as the final completed story.

No one would expect a team to keep interested in practice work if there were no game to look forward to. You might tell the members of the team a hundred times that the practice was good for them, that they would see the benefit of all this hard work in the future, but you would not get much response from them, I am thinking. Yet many of us do this same thing in theme work. We give our pupils all the practice work and forget to arrange for the game that makes the preliminary work worth their best efforts.

The needed publicity can be gained in the lower classes by putting up on the bulletin board, or the blackboard, for every one to see, the bad work beside the good work; by commenting freely and openly on both good and bad points; by passing work around the class for correction or judgment; by reading aloud bad papers as well as good ones, by sending a set of papers to another class for inspection and com-

ment; by inviting other teachers to come in and inspect the work on the board; by keeping as much as possible the written work grades separate from the other English grades so that a pupil will know exactly how he stands in respect to the rest of the class in this matter, or, in other words, by keeping always before the pupil the fact that he is writing for an interested public, not merely for the teacher and the wastebasket.

If there is any ambition or pride in the pupil, he will soon begin to feel ashamed of poor work and put forth his utmost effort not to be considered inferior to his fellows. This form of publicity which I have just described can be applied to stimulate interest in the *mechanics of writing* especially. And as every normal pupil can acquire the minimum of the school requirements in the mechanics of writing, we need not hesitate for fear of doing an injustice to the individual pupil to give all possible publicity to the theme work.

In the writing of news stories and items, editorials, advertisements, etc., the necessary motivation can be given by having the members of the class prepare newspapers of their own which will be exhibited later on. When they start on this phase of their composition work, let them understand at the very beginning that the best themes under the various heads are to be used in the making of these newspapers. It is surprising the enthusiasm that can be aroused in a class and the lessons in good citizenship which can be instilled by the making of these newspapers. The pupils go at the practice work with such an end in view with a vigor and a vim that brushes aside all obstruction. The daily papers receive an attention never before vouchsafed them by the students. The working over of themes becomes a worthwhile piece of work. Many a boy whom the teacher has given up as hopeless will come to life under the stimulus of this newspaper work. He thinks that this is something practical and worthwhile—a man's job. In such an undertaking he does not care to be at the tail end of the class; hence, he gets to work with vigor. He now needs no urging or pushing from the teacher; his own interest is sufficient driving power.

One reason that the making of a newspaper calls forth such enthusiasm from the pupils is that it also offers in a high degree the *third* essential of worthwhileness: that is, freshness and attractiveness of subject matter. These three—publicity, a definite, concrete goal, and freshness of subject matter—are the fundamental essentials in composition writing if the work is to make a strong appeal to students. I am afraid that this last essential—freshness and attractiveness of subject matter—is often forgotten, more

often than the average teacher is willing to acknowledge. Or, if not forgotten, it is too often viewed from the teacher's or textbook maker's angle rather than the student's. If the composition work is to be made worthwhile to the pupil, we must get away from the idea that only literary subjects are suitable for theme work in English classes. Not many of our pupils will take up literary criticism as either a vocation or an avocation. Yet, from the character of theme assignments which are given the pupils of many schools, you would think that the life work of these pupils was to be concerned principally with criticism and discussion of what we term the English "Classics."

To judge from some of the theme assignments given in some schools you would never imagine that high school pupils needed training in the expression of their ideas along the lines of their principal interests or their future life work. You would never imagine that they would need in the near future to discuss and write on the public questions agitating their communities. This is all wrong. Our theme assignments must be linked up with the daily interests of the pupils. It would be hard for many a teacher herself to write an acceptable paper on some of the topics assigned to third and fourth year pupils by some teachers; then why expect the pupil to write on such subjects? Oh, well, it will do as well as any other to find out the pupil's failings in the mechanics of writing; so these teachers say. Perhaps, but that is all it will do. No; I am wrong. Such assignments will certainly do one more thing, if no other. They will make the pupil think composition a mere school exercise—an exercise that has no relation to real life. If it is hard, I might say almost an impossibility, for adults to write acceptably on subjects they are not interested in; then why should we expect our young people to do this difficult thing? Why expend such vast stores of energy and time, trying to work up in the minds of immature students a fictitious interest in literary criticism and similar matters, when there are whole reservoirs of untouched interest to be tapped on matters pertaining to the daily lives of these same pupils? Some of the most valuable lessons in good citizenship and in ethics can be taught through compositions on the questions of the day and on matters that are interesting the school at that particular moment.

So we must in each theme assignment seek for a live, fresh subject—but also within the limits of the pupil's interests and power to handle—if we want the pupil to really play the game and make the goal on his own initiative.

My second special problem is the problem of the

lack of a proper foundation upon which to rear the superstructure after the interest in the work is aroused and the plans drawn. Right here is where we so often go down to defeat.

For behold, we find that the foundation upon which we expected to build our beautiful superstructure is only half completed, or which is worse, is so out of level that it is often necessary for us to tear out the old foundation of bad habits and put in a new foundation of correct habits in the mechanics of writing before we can begin on the superstructure. So we go to work patiently, or otherwise, according to our temperament to get the foundation ready. This ought not to be; for all the interest and enthusiasm which we had worked up in class in regard to some specially interesting theme assignment—the interest and enthusiasm which would have made that assignment a worthwhile piece of work is exhausted before we get the foundation ready, and what would have been a live piece of work degenerates into a hated task. This is all wrong. The pupil ought to be so well drilled on the *mechanics of written work* by the time he reaches the upper grades of the high school that most of the composition time should be free to be given to content and literary form.

I really believe that this problem of the laying of the correct foundation in the mechanics of written work is the greatest problem which we have to contend with in the high school today. It is what is making the teaching of high school composition such a burden. It is because of this lack that each high school teacher is not only attempting to do her own work, but a great deal of what should have been done in each of the preceding grades so that the cumulative work of the last years of the high school course is almost more than any teacher can stand up under. There are very few teachers of English in our high schools who are not trying to do their own work and some one else's besides. If each one of these teachers is doing her best, where is the trouble you will ask. It lies mostly in the lack of preparation in the mechanics of writing which the great majority of pupils show on entering high school.

For this reason there should be a minimum requirement in the mechanics of written and spoken English which every pupil should reach before entering high school. As it is now, every first year high school teacher spends the major portion of her time doing what should have been done in the grades; the second year teacher, doing what the first year teacher could not find time to do; and the fourth year teacher, frantically attempting to gather up all the loose ends in

addition to doing the regular fourth year work. Under such conditions the fourth year teacher, if she will work from ten to twelve hours on Saturday as well as on school days and then throw in half of Sunday for good measure, *may be able* to send her pupils out prepared for college. But if she is not able or willing to do this, then the college must take up the task the senior English teacher failed to accomplish.

I do not blame the individual grade teachers for the lack of preparation which the majority of children entering high school show so much as I do ourselves for not insisting upon minimum requirements for the grades. It is our own fault as much as it is theirs. How can they come up to our requirements if they do not know them? Have we high school teachers tried to put before the grade teachers a definite set of requirements in regard to the mechanics of written work? Have we not just blamed these teachers without trying to reach out a helping hand? I believe the majority of them would try to reach our requirements, if they knew exactly what we wanted and knew how to go about the work. As it is at present, the grade teachers are at sea as to what we want in the mechanics of writing. At present each grade teacher has his own standard and works regardless of the others, the result being that the child comes to regard the mechanics of writing as something merely dependent upon the whim of the teacher of the moment. Suppose a child has come up through the seven years of the grammar school, changing his teacher each semester, or even each year—thus having from fourteen to seven teachers during that time, and not two having the same standards for written work—need you be surprised that he has thrown aside all rules and requirements and writes to suit himself?

The third special problem which I wish to touch upon this morning is really another phase of my second problem, though viewed from another angle. For just as high school teachers complain of the lack of a proper foundation in written work on the part of the pupils entering high school so the colleges and the business men complain of the deficiencies of high school students in the matter of correct usage in writing. The high school teachers of English are even more aware of the defects of the average high school pupil in the matter of written English than are the college professors and the captains of industry, though perforce they do not write so many articles to the magazines as their critics do on this subject. Nevertheless, they are bending all their energies to better conditions. But they are up against a Herculean task much more than the average man or woman realizes;

for though admitting that correct usage in the matter of written English can be acquired only by constant practice under careful guidance, the public in general have very hazy ideas of what constitutes a sufficient amount of written work to fit the average boy or girl to meet the requirements of modern life in the matter of written English. If our boys and girls were embryo Robert Louis Stevensons or Benjamin Franklins, it would be merely necessary to place before them models of correct composition, and they would do the rest; but since the majority of our pupils are just ordinary bright boys and girls, that is not sufficient. Every English teacher of any experience knows that the average boy not only must have correct models set before him, but that his individual errors must be carefully pointed out and he must be shown how to correct them if he is to improve in his written work.

Now, under our present system the average student is not getting enough of this drill in the correction of his individual errors to give him the training he needs for effective written expression. English teachers realize this, but as matters now stand they are not able to require more written work from their pupils. A little calculation will show you why this is so. English teachers in the larger city high schools usually have five classes of from twenty-five to thirty pupils. We will say an average of 135 pupils to a teacher. If a teacher with 135 pupils requires a weekly theme of 150 words, or a page of theme paper from each pupil, she will have 20,250 words to read and correct. At the rate of 2000 words an hour, which is as much long hand as can be read and corrected in one hour, this will require ten hours for the first reading and correcting. Then it will take an additional five hours for the second reading and the extra help needed by the very poor pupils. Thus we have a total of fifteen hours of out of school work when there are large classes if only a page of written work is required of each pupil a week. But one page of carefully corrected work is certainly not sufficient in the higher classes. There should be at the very least an average of 450 words a week required of the older pupils. But where is the time to be found under our present system for adequate correction of this work? For this would mean forty-five hours of work a week after school.

It cannot be found unless a change is made in the present method of assigning teaching duty to English teachers. If time is to be found to do all the correcting of written work which is due each pupil, then English teachers must either have much smaller classes or they must have assistance in the way of theme reading. The time must come soon I think when it will be con-

sidered just as essential to the welfare of the school that theme readers be assigned to help high school English teachers as it is today to supply laboratory facilities for the study of the sciences. And until some such assistance is given to the English teachers, I am afraid that the complaints of colleges and business men will continue to be justified to a great extent.

These three problems—the need of making the composition work worthwhile to the student, the lack of the proper foundation in the mechanics of writing shown by pupils entering the high school, and the need of more time for correcting themes—seems to me to be the most pressing problems for the teachers of written composition today.

## SUPERVISED STUDY IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

By THOS. H. FRANKS

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IN THE FALL of 1920 our school was organized on the 6-3-3 plan. The main purpose in putting in the junior high school was to help the students to make the transfer from the grammar grades to the difficult first year of high school. There were not enough students here to justify the organization of a junior high school which would aim to provide for vocational guidance or to furnish different kinds of training for different classes of students. It was hoped that the organization of the junior high school would help the pupils to start safely through the high school; that it would help the students to take up Latin or Algebra or other high school subjects with more prospect of passing them.

The plan did not work the first year. There were more failures in the first and second year junior high school classes than there had usually been in the old eighth or first year high school class. There were several causes for the large number of failures. Some of the causes lay in the organization itself, defects which were apparent before the year was half over. Probably the chief cause of the failures was that a large percentage of the students were not sufficiently well prepared for the work of the classes into which they were placed.

In the fall of 1921 the junior high school organization was changed in four important particulars. First, the students in the upper third of the sixth grade of last year were promoted to the second year of the junior high school, or 8B grade as we more frequently call it. All the other sixth grade students went to the first year of the junior high school, or the 7th grade. The nine students who were jumped from the sixth to the 8B grade are making higher averages than the remainder of the class. It is expected that these pupils will hold their own through the high school. This makes it possible for these students who were promoted from the 6th to the 8B grade to complete the school here in eleven years instead of twelve. Inci-

dentally this is helping us to get better work out of many of the sixth grade students this year. A large percentage of the students want to be in the upper third of their class.

The second change in the organization was to provide for more study time at school. Instead of 7 forty-five minute periods 8 forty minute periods were substituted. This increased the school day twenty-five minutes, decreased slightly the time devoted to recitation, and increased the time for the preparation of lessons. It is difficult to get a large number of students to do any satisfactory work out of school. This change made it possible for us to get more work out of them, and under more favorable conditions than they would otherwise have. This second change has proved to be very desirable.

The third improvement was to put in charge of these three junior high school classes, 7th, 8B, and 8th, as strong teachers as we could secure, and teachers whose previous experience fitted them for doing the work that needed to be done in these grades. Results so far have amply proved the wisdom of the selections made. One of the teachers came from the grammar grades in this school, another had done grammar grade work here and then high school work, and the third had done considerable work in coaching both high school students and college students. These teachers were given the most vital subjects, mathematics and English, in their respective grades, and had charge of enough of the study periods so that these teachers were in a very real sense responsible for putting their grades across. In the 8th grade the Latin teacher was provided a supervised study period.

The fourth and big change made in the junior high school organization was provision for real supervised study periods. By supervised study periods is not meant the kind of study period in which the teacher simply keeps the room quiet, if she can, while she corrects papers or writes letters, helping only those